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# Bryan L. McDonald, *Food Power: The Rise and Fall of the Postwar American Food System*

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1 Bryan L. McDonald, *Food Power: The Rise and Fall of the Postwar American Food System*

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4 Although *Food Power: The Rise and Fall of the Postwar American Food System* concerns roughly the years 1945-1975, the importance of McDonald's book for today's food security is tremendous. In his capacity as a Sherwin Early Career Professor in the Rock Ethics Institute and Associate Professor of History at Penn State University, Bryan McDonald delves into American history to explore American national security and national interests through the deployment of food in the years after World War II. Like his earlier publication – Food Security (Polity Press, 2010) in which McDonald investigated the late twentieth century origins of contemporary food security challenges – Food Power proves both timely and relevant to early twenty-first country food challenges and threats (food sovereignty, food security, malnutrition and obesity, food sustainability, etc). McDonald's research proves pertinent to the current situation, as food "has been a focus of national security in the past, and in ways that affected global affairs, improved America's standing in the world, and reduced global hunger and deprivation ... food is unlikely to ever be a solved problem. Instead, it should be seen as a landscape of challenges that each generation must take up again for themselves, to consider anew how to best fulfill their food needs and wants" (197).

5 "Introduction: Food Power, the Food Network, and American Security" familiarizes the readers with the concept of food power as an element of national power. McDonald explains that food power was used "as a demonstration of the good life that was enjoyed by a larger and larger number of people," or "as a valuable weapon in the arsenal of democracy at a time when the global need for food was rising" (2). In this concise

introduction McDonald presents food as a means of control: as a way "to accomplish diplomatic goals" (3) or "a softer form of power, deployed through the avenues of trade or foreign assistance" (4). Thus, food power includes using food as a weapon to improve national security, for example by imposing food embargos (as a disciplining measure), through aid programs and reconstruction assistance (Food for Peace), and using food as a commodity in global exchange. McDonald also skillfully identifies pre-1945 changes which helped shape American food power: improvements in transportation, the rise of large food processors, the science of nutrition, and changes in farming (10). He also analyzes why the post-1970s food system evolved into the contemporary food network, with an emphasis on "investigating the aims that motivated the American policymaking efforts responsible for its development" (10).

6 McDonald identifies the perfect storm of the world food crisis between 1972-74 as a threshold of change from a food system to food networks. He explains that food networks "are interconnected systems that allow sharing between systems and contain regularized interactions between nodes of activity" (9). According to McDonald, the New World Food Order since the 1970s is not a "relatively stable, American-driven postwar food system," but rather a network which is "a complex and ever shifting landscape where states, companies, international organizations, nongovernmental groups, individuals, and communities advance and contest visions of ideal food relationships" (7). The thorough scholarship and historical research which undergirds McDonald's book and its contemporary relevance are undeniable assets of Food Power. McDonald uses this book to "explain contemporary challenges related to ensuring food security, at a time when we are still grappling with the expectations and goals of the postwar food system, even if we are no longer living and working within its parameters" (10).

7 The book's chapters are ordered chronologically, tracing the rise and fall of the postwar food system. Chapter one, "Freedom from Want: Creating a Postwar Food System," explores America's role in postwar reconstruction efforts. The subchapter about the world food system before and during World War II is informative, with concise information about Liberty gardens, farmers' dislocation, the Great Depression, field kitchens and food rationing, which sheds some light on the complexities of the food system. American surpluses (unprecedented agricultural abundance in the years after the war) were used to relieve humanitarian crises and revitalize European economies. Foreign nations in need received financial and material aid, which America provided in the form of reconstruction and recovery plans. More than just a charitable act, sending surpluses abroad to war-torn Europe – through for instance the Marshall Plan – "advanced American vital interests and national security" (46). Food was connected with national security and was intended to "promote postwar reconstruction and serve as a bulwark against communism" (12). As such, food power meant a display of national power (46). The decision to export surpluses had two dimensions: on the one hand "eliminating world hunger was central to visions of a postwar world" (29); on the other "advancing national interests" meant "ensuring national security" (47).

8 Chapter two, "Fixed Stomachs and Convenience Foods: Abundance and Food in the 1950s," tackles the issue of the use of American abundance, which symbolized prosperity in the Cold War. It is most visible in the 1959 Kitchen Debate between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. McDonald brilliantly demonstrates that this "vision of prosperity and consumerism was one of the country's most powerful pieces of propaganda during the Cold War" (49). Capitalism and

consumerism were effective weapons against communism while "an abundance of food provided America with a powerful but peaceful weapon" (51). Consumption of goods was to be an effective vaccine against socialist and/or communist systems. Thus, "consuming modern convenience foods was a way for Americans to express patriotism and national identity" (49). The American restaurantscape evolved through the invention of drive-throughs and the consolidation of the position of fast food chains. The supermarket became a symbol of the superiority and efficiency of the American system (51). Americans took advantage of "advances in food science and technology" (convenient, frozen and processed foods) and food marketing to "link local, regional, and national food chains" (49). Yet despite those conveniences, emerging health concerns about vitamins, nutrients, and calories clouded the idealized image (64), while falling rural prosperity emerged as the underbelly of the abundance of the 1950s. A crisis was looming on the horizon: American families were spending more on food, while farmers were earning less (51; 72).

9 Chapter three, "Freedom to Farm: Prosperity, Security, and 'the Farm Problem'," touches on "the efforts to shape farm policy to preserve small-scale farming and eliminate surpluses even as the modern agricultural revolution was beginning to produce historic and ever-increasing harvests" (13). If food surpluses were unavoidable (they depressed farm prices, hurting rural prosperity, and raised the costs of federal farm programs and food-storage efforts), then it was believed that at least they "could be harnessed as a powerful and deployable weapon to use in addressing foreign policy goals" (72). Food aid and assistance abroad killed two birds with one stone: they fed people and stabilized domestic and foreign food markets (13). Eisenhower's administration – with secretary of agriculture Ezra Benson as its vocal advocate – undertook various initiatives (mechanization, new technologies, and scientific advances) to solve the farm problem (104). Despite their various efforts, interventionism (which weakened farmers' self sufficiency (88)) and other government programs did not solve the farm problem. Yet, Benson's claim about agriculture – "get big or get out" – is more applicable than ever to the present agricultural situation of Monsanto seeding fear among small farmers. Benson's fears of "undue government intervention in agriculture" and of "farmers producing not for markets and in response to consumer demand, but to sell crops to government programs that offered guaranteed prices" (104) came true at the beginning of the 21st century.

10 Chapter four, "What to Eat after an Atomic Bomb: Deploying Food Power Defensively" presents research that is also relevant to the contemporary socio-economic landscape. In the 1950s plans for building shelters and stockpiling food "were developed to protect Americans, arms, and livestock from nuclear war" (13). Similarly, today "preppers" plan what to do in the event of nuclear attack. Again, food power was used during the Cold War to utilize American abundance and enhance national security. Experts and civil defense planners worked to engage individuals in "self-help" and DIY civil defense efforts. This chapter details "the various political and practical issues involved in the attempts to create a civil defense system built around shelters and helps to explain why ... so few Americans actually built shelters" (106). Construction of civilian shelters entailed problems connected with stockpiling on the level of individual civilians. Such issues as food safety, food perishability, and "high-calorie, low-spoilage foods" (120-121) represented a conflict of interests between two agendas within food politics: on the one hand civil defense stockpiling necessitated agricultural surpluses, and on the other the

government was trying to reduce those surpluses in order to solve the farm problem (125).

11 The role of food in the efforts of J. F. Kennedy's and Lyndon Johnson's administrations to promote peace and stability in global affairs along with efforts to manage or reduce food surpluses in the domestic arena is the subject of the fifth chapter, "Food for Peace and the War on Hunger: Food Power in the 1960s." McDonald explores the administrations' twofold approach to the farm problem: enhanced domestic aid programs (food stamps, free school lunches) and an increase in international food aid, in both the public and the private sector. He explains that under Kennedy's and Johnson's presidencies the scope of American food power expanded to include various American assistance programs and humanitarian assistance. America distributed food surpluses but also the know-how needed to produce food. During the Cold War food was an important element in establishing Soviet-American relations, especially after a Soviet food crisis. The chapter ends with a discussion of the "Green Revolution" of the 1960s, which addressed the issues of global food insecurity, although this was a private (e.g. the Rockefeller Foundation) rather than governmental endeavor.

12 The analytical threads are brought together nicely in the sixth chapter, "The World Food Crisis and the End of the Postwar Food System." The long awaited elimination of agricultural abundance (through food assistance programs) during the Nixon administration, combined with changes in domestic agricultural policy, political decisions (selling grain to the Soviet Union at subsidized prices), environmental shocks (extreme weather events), a demographic boom in the context of a Malthusian catastrophe, and economic shocks (the "Nixon shock"/price-freeze) together created a perfect storm which ended the postwar food system. The food system is dead; long live the food network.

13 The results of the efforts to manage unprecedented agricultural abundance exceeded the expectations of US presidents and policymakers. McDonald presents a rich array of evidence to demonstrate that food surpluses were gladly used to stabilize food prices and to offer food assistance programs domestically and internationally during the Cold War. However, with political/ economic/ demographic/ environmental turbulence, America was no longer willing and able to devote the lion's share of its abundance with the rest of the world in the 1970s. With no single country able to fill America's shoes in the wake of the food crisis of 1972-74, the world food network was born. McDonald convincingly demonstrates that the structure of a network – with local, regional, national, and transnational food systems amalgamated into one network – has a greater potential to meet global nutritional needs: "the world food network links food chains at multiple scales in a complex and rapidly shifting web of food relations that provides the world's growing number of people with food on a day-to-day basis" (191). Food networks are less vulnerable to state monopoly but still have to deal with "climate change and transnational threats such as terrorism, pandemics, and cybercrime, all empowered by global information and transportation networks" (192).

14 And if there is any weakness in the book, it is perhaps the fact that McDonald offers only a glimpse of some conceptual ground concerning the pre-1945 social/economic/historical situation in the USA. I believe that potentially illuminating and explanatory insights concerning Victory gardens deserve more than just a mention in the first chapter, even if this issue is outside the historical purview of the book. The scanty, explanatory insights into the rhetoric during the First World War surrounding War Gardens does not do them

sufficient justice in the context of their importance for civilian support for the larger war effort and the ongoing war on hunger. About 25 percent of total food production in 1943 went to the armed forces and to allies. Thus, planting Victory Gardens, as a patriotic cause, set a precedent in civilian input into American Food Power. Later on, in the 1990's, Michael Pollan, an environmental writer, would suggest we should "Abolish the White House Lawn." In March 2009, even Michelle Obama would set an example by planting a "kitchen garden" at the White House, as did Eleanor Roosevelt in 1943 during another national crisis.

15 Food Power is a highly readable, perceptive and thought-provoking book, which provides rich, well-documented insights into American Postwar Food Power. McDonald's study will prove extremely insightful and edifying for readers with a background in history, politics or critical food studies.